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Five Chinese Historical Events That Don't Get Much Attention

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By Kate Merkel-Hess

After Jeremiah Jenne recently posed a question about "the most important Chinese historical figure most people have never heard of," I got to thinking about the vast expanse of Chinese history that is so often neglected in favor of the (admittedly sometimes more-relevant) post-49 events. In chronological order, here are my five nominations for Chinese historical events I wish were more often talked and written about. What events make your list?

1. **The An Lushan Rebellion**
Led by the rogue general, An Lushan, the civil war that riled the Tang Dynasty from 755 to 763 caused death by violence and famine of over ten million people. But the An Lushan Rebellion is not on this list because of its high death toll. The rebellion also destabilized the Tang political regime and the aristocratic clans who supported it, reshaping a system that relied heavily on pedigree for advancement. Histories of China's imperial exam system often note that it existed (in some form, though off-and-on) beginning in the Han. But until the An Lushan Rebellion, hereditary position mattered more than merit. In the post-rebellion upheaval, however, the state centralized the process

of appointing officials, a process that would become incr easingly regulated and transparent in the following centuries (and particularly with the reforms of Zhu Xi in the 12th century). Until the end of the Qing (and beyond, but that's another story), most officeholders were, indeed, from the wealthy families that could afford to support their sons as they studied decades for the exams (exam passers were often in their 40s or even older), but there was the possibility—and some famous examples of—poor men who rose to high position. China's meritocratic officialdom—the world's first meritocracy—had enormous ramifications for the bureaucracy itself, but its greatest impact was to create a national elite culture whereby well-educated men from around China, despite linguistic tradition or family background, participated in a shared intellectual tradition. Notably, this intellectual life took deepest root in the wealthy southern Yangzi Delta, an area whose population and economy grew rapidly after the An Lushan Rebellion as a direct result of the southward migrations that resulted from the rebellion's upheaval. The nouveau riche landlords who emerged in this area found the revised exam system a particularly effective way to convert their wealth into officially-recognized status.

2. **The Founding of the Yuan Dynasty**
Most people even a little familiar with Chinese or world history have heard of Kublai Khan (grandson of Genghis), the founder of the Yuan Dynasty, which ruled China from 1271 to 1368. The Mongol conquering and governing of China, however, had more implications than just the spread of the plague and the introduction of new warfare techniques. Sinologists have traditionally seen the Yuan as

an exception in Chinese history—foreign, nomadic rulers who practiced Tibetan Buddhism (as well as their own animist traditions) who were not, unlike the Manchus, successfully "sinicized." Recent revisitations of this history, however, have provided new ideas about the legacy of the Mongols. On the one hand, there are the accidental implications—the incursions of northern nomadic peoples, even before Genghis's military sweep, sent many northern Chinese south during the preceding few centuries (as did Mongol clearing of lands in northern China to make room for more pastureland). These settlers not only turned southern wilderness to arable land, but established the cultural and economic heartland of China. Politically, the Mongols centralized power, strengthening the control of the emperor over the bureaucracy and over local elites. Perhaps most importantly, the Mongols in many ways set a model for the Qing dynasty—not only as nomads governing an agricultural empire (as Mark Elliott argued in *The Manchu Way*, the ruling Manchus—rightly or wrongly—used the weakening of Mongol nomad customs as the explanation of their downfall, and used that fact as a rallying cry to maintain their own culture against the incursions of the attractive, but supposedly soft Chinese culture), but also as a unified multicultural empire that encompassed under a single state structure a variety of religious and ethnic groups. These geographic boundaries and ethnic diversity were ideas that early twentieth century reformers worked hard to maintain, and homages to them can be readily seen in today's Chinese culture and politics.

3. **The Single Whip Reforms**
Arguably of greater importance to world history than Chinese history, the Ming Dynasty Single Whip Reform of 1581 ordered that all land taxes in China be paid in silver. One in a series of reforms (referred to in their entirety as the "Single Whip Reforms"; 1581 is perhaps the most important of them) that increasingly monetized the Chinese tax system, the changes impacted even the lowliest Chinese peasant—who could no longer pay his taxes in kind, but instead had to purchase silver in order to do so. The reform could not have been implemented without the large amount of silver pouring into China from Spanish Empire (South American) mines, and the resulting domestic need for silver pushed up its global price. It has even been argued by Dennis Flynn that without Chinese demand pushing up silver prices, the Spanish crown would not have earned enough from its New World possessions to keep governing them, much less finance decades of warfare in Europe itself. And it's also worth remembering that under the Song and Yuan Dynasties, China actually had a functioning paper currency system—the world's first. Had the Ming restored that rather than following the private sector's turn to silver (after the late Yuan and especially the early Ming destroyed confidence in paper currency by over-printing it) both Chinese and global history might have been quite different.

4. **The White Lotus Rebellion**
Arguments about China's nineteenth-century "dynastic decline" often begin with the White Lotus Rebellion, a sectarian uprising from 1796 to 1804, arguing that the rebellion exposed the inherent weaknesses of the ruling Manchus and the Qing dynasty. While it is true that there were a range of symptoms that, retrospectively, indicate the coming problems for the Qing (the increasing neglect of the waterways over the course of the nineteenth century, for instance), the Qing response to the White Lotus Rebellion was not one of them. Recent research (for instance, the doctoral research of my colleague, Wensheng Wang) argues that the Qing government dealt effectively and flexibly with the White Lotus Rebellion, countering the notion of a static, out-of-touch court too steeped in tradition and luxury to respond to contemporary events. In this reading, the White Lotus Rebellion becomes instead an example of the continued vibrancy of Qing rule into the nineteenth century, and raises further questions for Chinese historians about what events were most important to the "downfall" of the Qing.

5. **The 1911 Chinese Revolution**
Overshadowed in twentieth century history by the 1949 Communist Revolution, the 1911 Chinese Revolution proceeded from a remarkable series of localized events. It was not the result of an inevitable march towards "Westernization" as it is sometimes portrayed in shorthand, but rather reflective of two strong late nineteenth century trends: increasing nationalism and increasing localism. Both were extensions of shifts grounded in the elite efforts to suppress the Taiping Rebellion in the mid-nineteenth century. As Philip Kuhn described in his 1970 landmark book, *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China*, the central government's inability to suppress the Taiping rebels forced local (mainly southern) elites to band together their own militias to protect their cities and counties. These militia, in turn, became the recruiting grounds for full-blown armies (which unlike militia, would fight away from home for long periods) under regional commanders; this was an important step toward the warlordism that would wreak havoc in China in the 1910s and 1920s. This tendency, which grew into a full-blown self-government movement in the first decade of the twentieth century, moved alongside a growing fin de siècle Chinese nationalism (exemplified, for instance, in the Boxer Rebellion). Both came to a head over a nationwide push to repurchase railroad rights (which is one of the primary issues around which the Wuhan New Army member, who actually touched off the Qing overthrow, had organized). In the wake of that event, local elites—some military leaders, others old-school gentry—declared their independence from Beijing. The resulting tensions of growing nationalism but also militarized localism plagued the young republic and reverberations of these tensions can be traced down to the present day.

Images:
"Tang Scholars," by Han Huang, active 723-787
Portrait of Kublai Khan.